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About a month ago I was at a conference in Krakow, and I visited Auschwitz for the first time. It was a chilly mid-January day, but the skies were blue. I stood there and looked up at them. I was reminded of the first time I returned from Poland, on a summer day four years earlier. Then, I had landed from Warsaw after visiting the city's large Jewish cemetery, and what had once been the ghetto but is now a residential neighborhood. In that first visit, the skies had also been blue and clear. I looked down from the airplane and said to myself: Here, it was here. This is the Warsaw where my grandfather was born in 1901, from which he immigrated to Israel in 1919 as a member of a Zionist youth movement. This is where all the childhood stories he told us took place. This is the Warsaw of Janusz Korczak, and that is how this city's skies looked when the Rebbe of Piaseczno cried out, in one of his last sermons, "Why aren't the skies weeping?!"

Researching the Holocaust is very meaningful to me. It is especially important to me to expose the Israeli public to deep religious discourse on the Holocaust because little is known about this discourse in Israel. One example is Hans Jonas' theological essay: "The Concept of God after Auschwitz". I edited this essay after it was translated to Hebrew, and I am glad it was published. As an educator and academic, I am very disturbed by how the Holocaust is treated in Israel. My first visit to Auschwitz, when I was over the age of fifty, was mentally unbearable for me. Yet our children are taken on Holocaust tours, in which they visit a different extermination camp every day, as if they were art museums. . . Is this the right way to handle Holocaust remembrance? In the essay I mentioned, Hans Jonas says he knows very well that his theological writing as a philosopher is an imaginary act. And despite this, he emphasizes that it is very important in his eyes, because it is a discussion of the spiritual and human significance of the events that took place in Europe in the Second World War. Hans Jonas' attempt to understand what remained of theology in the face of what happened is an important example of the debate on many questions: Does the term "chosen people" have meaning when the people has been chosen for annihilation? Should the world view at the foundation of the expression "from destruction to restoration" really be maintained? The discourse that arose from observing the blue skies – those very skies that remained silent facing what was happening on the earth's surface – is one of the vital keys to diminishing the banal dialogue on the Holocaust. There is too little creative, frank, and deep thinking, confronting the huge void left by the Holocaust, and therefore this void is often filled with cliches. These cliches have been waved more than once by the organizers of those very youth tours that trouble me so much.

Ron Margolin

Reflections on the Holocaust in Jewish Thought

A large part of the literary oeuvre devoted to the Holocaust and its horrors deals with personal memory, in contrast with the memory of historical documentation, which falls within the territory of historians. However, alongside the narrative genre, philosophical writings have developed, which place the question of the Holocaust's meaning in the center, without necessarily linking it directly to literary memory. Based on individual memories, and enabled by the work of the guardians of collective historical memory, various thinkers have conducted a theoretical discussion of the big questions raised by the Holocaust, from a theological and existential standpoint, questions it is difficult to silence.

This process began as early as the first years of the war. The pages of *HeHalutz*¹ *HaLochem* (The Fighting Halutz) – the underground periodical of *Akiva* a Zionist youth movement in Krakow – were penned primarily by Shimshon Draenger, one of the leaders of Krakow's underground and among the aforementioned movement's heads there.² Draenger asked himself why the underground was fighting a battle that did not have a chance, and his answer, which stemmed from his Zionist consciousness, was that the fighting's purpose was to boost the morale of the halutzim in the Land of Israel, looking ahead to the time when they would be called upon to found the Jewish state there. The sermons of the Hassidic leader and educator Rebbe Kalonymus Kalman Szapiro of Piaseczno, which were collected in his book *Aish Kodesh* (Holy Fire),³ also include, in their final pages, deep ponderings about what was unfolding. After many attempts to comprehend the war's events through the terminology of traditional Jewish thought, the Rebbe reached the conclusion that the event's gravity was unparalleled in Jewish history. Such a statement by one of Hassidism's most eminent teachers in the Warsaw Ghetto was no small matter from a religious perspective since, at the end of his days the Rebbe of

1 The term “halutz” refers to the pioneer Jews who immigrated to the Land of Israel in the years preceding the establishment of the State.

2 Draenger, Shimshon. (1984). *HeHalutz HaLochem (The Fighting Halutz): Mouthpiece of the Pioneering Jewish Youth in the Krakow Underground*, August – October. Tel Aviv: The Itzhak Katzenelson Ghetto Fighters' House and Hakibbutz Hameuchad. (Hebrew)

3 Shapira, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman. (1960). *Aish Kodesh (Holy Fire)*, Jerusalem: Piaseczno Hassidic Committee Publications. (Hebrew). See now: Shapira, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman. (2017). *Sermons from the Years of Race*. A critical edition according to the Author's Manuscript by Daniel Reiser, Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College, W.U.O.J.S and Yad Vashem.

Piaseczno found himself conceding that the events of the Holocaust could not be understood in terms of divine providence. Thus, for him, the Holocaust was a lapse in the world order, a kind of second *shevirat ha-kelim* (*breaking of the vessels*)⁴ even within the divine world itself.

Yet naturally, most philosophical writing about the meaning of the Holocaust began after the end of the war. And Elie Wiesel's first book, *Night*,⁵ would appear to constitute a turning point in this theoretical current. *Night* is the personal story of Elie Wiesel, who was deported along with his family from Hungary to Auschwitz. But the book – which includes a description of the capture and hanging of a *pipel*,⁶ the young boy who smuggled carrots to his fellow inmates in the labor camp Buna near Auschwitz – is not only a personal story but also contains a distinct theological leap, even if phrased through literary dialogue rather than theoretically. One of the inmates quietly asks his peer as they stand quietly in formation facing three gallows; the camp's Nazi commanders have hung the boy from the middle one. "Behind me, I heard the same man asking: 'For God's sake, where is God?'" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where is He? This is where-hanging here from these gallows . . ."⁷ This inner answer could be understood by Wiesel's Catholic readers in France as an allusion to Christianity: The hanging boy could be perceived by these readers as the image of Jesus the Christian. Yet from the narrator's Jewish perspective, the meaning of Elie Wiesel's story is that God was revealed in the Holocaust through the deeds of those individuals who succeeded in preserving God's image and rose above the circumstances for the good of others. Thus God, according to Wiesel, was revealed in the Holocaust in the image of people such as the boy *pipel*.

Night is a personal story that ends with a deep theological statement. Essay writing about the Holocaust began to develop bit by bit following the event, in an endeavor to grapple with its theological and philosophical implications. The Holocaust marks the deepest break in faith in individual divine providence in particular, and collective national divine providence as reflected in the history of the Jewish people, in general. Ostensibly, the destruction of the Second Temple also created a serious theological crisis due to the loss of the religious center in Jerusa-

4 The fracturing of the vessels or channels into which the powerful divine light was pouring during the process of creation according to the famous Kabbalist R. Yitzhaq Luria. Occurring before the universe came into existence, this catastrophe affected the *sefirot*, which constitute the divine *pleroma*.

5 Wiesel, Elie (2006). *Night*. Translation: Marion Wiesel. New York: Hill and Wang.

6 The term "pipel" refers to a young boy who wins special privileges in a concentration camp in exchange for collaboration.

7 Ibid., 65.

lem. However, there is no similarity between the severity of the Holocaust's repercussions and the spiritual crisis that plagued the people of Israel following the destruction of the Second Temple. The latter did not involve an attempt to exterminate the entire people, rather only the suppression of those who rebelled against the Roman Empire. Haman the Agagite's dream of destroying the Jewish people, a dream whose demise the Jews celebrate each year during Purim, was almost realized in full in the time of the Nazi regime in Europe. A third of the people was exterminated, and if it were not for the Allies' victory over Nazi Germany, who knows if, and how many, Jews would have survived the Second World War. It is no wonder that many good people lost faith in God's collective and individual providence during, and directly after, the Holocaust.

Faith in divine historical providence is not the only thing that was shattered by the Holocaust. In my opinion, various attempts to rationalize God's judgment after the Holocaust also sound absurd. The concept of Israel as the chosen people – whether through inheritance or a divine choice of the people of Israel as a collective – became grotesque to a great extent, when the people that was supposed to act to realize the divine intention in the world almost became extinct. “And yet, paradox of paradoxes: it was the ancient people of the ‘covenant’, no longer believed in by those involved, killers and victims alike, but nevertheless just this and no other people, under which the fiction of race had been chosen for this wholesale annihilation . . .”⁸

The establishment of the State of Israel, three years after the Holocaust, indeed provided relief for many and allowed them to view the state's establishment as compensation and rectification of the destruction, yet at the price of denying the gravity of the events from an individual perspective. The secular formulation of the concept of reward and punishment through the cliché “from destruction to restoration” was interpreted, consciously and even more so subconsciously, as part of the dialectical progression of history in the spirit of the philosophical method of the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel asserted that human intellectual history progresses in a dialectical process, in which the later stage is a synthesis of the two previous stages, and the previous stage is intellectually inferior to the following one and is intended to rectify the deficiencies of the previous stage. However, the third and last stage, which synthesizes between the two, supersedes them both, as it comprises the advantages of its predecessors while liberating itself from their disadvantages. In the Hege-

⁸ Jonas, Hans. (1996). “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice”, in: Jonas, Hans. *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the God after Auschwitz*, Evanston: Northwestern University press, 133.

lian spirit, the idea that, following the destruction the people was rewarded with restoration, renders the personal suffering and the horrendous wrongdoing incurred by each Jewish individual an ostensibly positive force, which propelled the wheels of history of national salvation. The faith in historical divine providence was conceived as stronger than the most painful facts of life, at the cost of turning those murdered into a necessary sacrifice on the path to the final national redemption rewarded to the remaining members of the nation. Yet, it would be unthinkable to come to terms with the barbaric murder of a million children as any justification for the establishment of the State of Israel.

Although some viewed the story of their own survival in the Second World War as testimony to a divine miracle, many many more saw the Holocaust as proof that a compassionate and gracious God who cares for the flock and directs history to realize the People of Israel's spiritual destiny, does not exist. In order to maintain their faith in Jewish historical providence, others relied on the argument that previous disasters also could have undermined faith in divine providence yet in any case they did not. Their opponents argued that the utter absurdity revealed in the fact that the "chosen people" was chosen from among all peoples for none other than destruction, is the ultimate, indisputable proof that a divinity that watches over Jewish history does not exist, and that the State of Israel was established as a result of the human suffering of members of the Jewish people, not by divine salvation. These types of arguments have mostly been raised since the sixties.⁹

In this context, responses by the Orthodox religious world are of particular interest. These responses can be divided into two types. Ultra-Orthodox leaders who attributed no special theological meaning to the Holocaust can be enumerated among the first type. A typical example of this group was Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe and the Chabad movement's seventh leader. Alongside the argument that we cannot comprehend God's acts, he compared the Holocaust to surgery by a physician who amputates a diseased limb to save the entire body. The Lubavitcher Rebbe based his position on a complete separation between the material and the spiritual, and he concluded that physical-corporeal evil is not necessarily intertwined with mental-spiritual evil, and

⁹ For example, by the Jewish American thinker Richard Rubinstein, by the Warsaw-born Jewish American journalist Alexander Donat, and in historian Yehuda Bauer's later articles. See: Rubenstein, Richard L. (1966). *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, Johns Hopkins University Press; Donat, Alexander. (1976). "Voice From the Ashes: Wanderings in Search of God", in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*. Editor: Steven T. Katz. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Bauer, Yehuda. (2000). *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yale University Press.

therefore the physical suffering involved in the Holocaust was not necessarily connected to spiritual suffering in the afterlife.¹⁰ Yet, those who do not adhere to such an extreme dualism like the Lubavitcher Rebbe may find it quite difficult to accept such an approach.

Unlike these voices, which concerned themselves with justifying God's judgment following the Holocaust, among the leaders of ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Judaism were those who opposed discussing the Holocaust in these terms and instead directed their gaze towards the absolute evil revealed in it. One such leader was Rabbi Joseph Ber (Yosef Dov) Soloveitchik, who concluded it was impossible to deny the existence of evil in history. In his words:

Evil is a fact that cannot be denied. There is evil in the world. There are suffering and agony, and death pangs. He who would deceive himself by ignoring the split in existence and by romanticizing life is but a fool and a fabricator of illusions. It is impossible to conquer monstrous evil with philosophical-speculative thought.¹¹

Since, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik's position, there can be no euphemism of history, which he coins as "fate", his approach to Judaism holds that humanity must mold its own destiny – "According to Judaism, man's mission in this world is to turn fate into destiny – an existence that is passive and influenced into an existence that is active and influential; an existence of compulsion, perplexity, and speechlessness into an existence full of will, vision and initiative."¹² Proximate to Rabbi Soloveitchik's stance, Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits asserted in his book, *Faith After the Holocaust*,¹³ that the divine was revealed in the Holocaust through the extraordinary human behavior of the oppressed. As an example, he cited the case of a Jewish couple who hid in an attic in the Ghetto. When they were discovered by Nazi soldiers, the man wanted to kill the first German who entered the attic, but the woman yelled out "thou shalt not kill" and prevented him from doing the deed, even though she knew they would die as a result, because she preferred to uphold the sages' prohibition "be killed but do not transgress". To Berkovits, this woman was elevated to a supreme level of human greatness:

At that moment, there no place on earth holier than that dark and dusty corner in that very attic in the Warsaw Ghetto. It was the Holy of Holies on earth, sharing in the very majesty of Sinai, when God descending upon it, proclaimed his "thou shalt not kill!". Who knows,

10 Schneerson, Menachem Mendel. (1977), *Faith and Science: Igrot Kodesh (Holy Letters) by the Holy Lubavitcher Rebbe May He Live a Long Life*. Kfar Chabad: Lubavitch Institute. 115–118. (Hebrew)

11 Soloveitchik, Joseph B. (2006) *Kol Dodi Dofek (Listen, My Beloved Knocks)*. translation: David Z. Gordon. New York: Yeshiva University, 4.

12 Ibid., 5–6.

13 Berkovits, Rabbi Eliezer. (1973). *Faith after the Holocaust*, New York: Ktav Publishing House.

whether that wretched little attic was not wrapt in even greater majesty than Sinai! In Sinai God proclaimed, in the Ghetto a hunted human being, at the risk of her own life, encanted God's commandment.¹⁴

The significance of religious voices like these is their refusal to speak about the Holocaust in terms of justifying God's judgment, instead proposing insights that do not seek to justify God's silence under these horrific circumstances.

After the World War, philosophers and existentialists spoke a great deal about the importance of personal responsibility. In his novel *The Plague*¹⁵, Albert Camus presented personal responsibility as one of the main ways to overcome existential absurdism, which the events of the Second World War elevated to heights never known before. Hans Jonas, whose book *The Imperative of Responsibility*,¹⁶ first articulated the human responsibility to prevent technological developments that could endanger the existence of future generations, explained in his theological essay "The Concept of God after Auschwitz" why the idea of "God" must undergo a conceptual change following the Holocaust. He summarized the essay in the following words:

Having given himself whole to the becoming world, God has no more to give: it is man's now to give to him. And he may give by seeing to it in the ways of his life that it does not happen or happen too often, and not on his account, that it 'repented the Lord' to have made the world.¹⁷

In Israel, in contrast, the discussion of the concept of human responsibility in the wake of the Holocaust has been limited to the Jewish-national context in the spirit of political Zionism. The State of Israel came to be perceived more and more as the ultimate Jewish response to the Holocaust and the responsibility demanded of the Israeli public was narrowed to responsibility for the state's military and economic existence. In Israel, the tendency to view the Holocaust exclusively as a national tragedy is also prominent, and there is scarce reference to the link between the Jewish Holocaust and the human catastrophe the Second World War also brought upon millions of people who were not Jews. These words do not purport to minimize the magnitude of the tragedy endured by the Jewish people in the Second World War, and certainly not the severity of the Final Solution, which intended to wipe out the Jewish people, and was halted only by the Allies' victory

¹⁴ Ibid, 77.

¹⁵ Camus, Albert. (1957). *The Plague*. translation: Stuart Gilbert. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

¹⁶ Jonas, Hans. (1984). *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁷ Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, 142.

over Nazi Germany. Yet, clearly the vast majority of Israelis are unaware that, in addition to the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, approximately 26,160,000 civilians were murdered in the Second World War (in addition to 1,840,000 German and Austrian civilians), 19,000,000 soldiers were killed (in addition to another 5,500,000 German soldiers). In other words, more people were killed in the Second World War than in any other war in human history. Therefore, it is critical to understand the Holocaust as part of a greater tragedy that struck many peoples, in varying degrees of severity. The fate of the Jews cannot be isolated from the fate of humanity, and the tendency of Jewish tradition – which draws from the biblical masterpiece – to view Jewish history as a sacred national history propelled by unique divine providence, does not stand the factual test of historical reality. Commemoration of the tragedy of the Jewish people, which suffered more than any other people from the criminal brutality of the Nazis and their abettors, should also ideally become a beacon that reminds the world of the suffering of all humans who fell victim to the maniacal misdeeds and racism of the Nazis and others like them. The ever-increasing dulling of the senses in Israeli society with respect to inflicting racist harm on minorities cannot be tolerated and is incompatible with the Holocaust's most basic lessons. A people that has suffered more than any other from reprehensible racism cannot allow itself this type of dulling of the senses.

In my view, the Holocaust's central human lesson has not been learned or heard properly. I refer to the imperative of responsibility which obligates every human being to preserve the divinity revealed in the human spirit. This is the imperative answered by the Righteous Among the Nations, and all those persecuted by the evil Nazi regime who maintained this human spirit in every daily act they committed under impossible circumstances. Therefore, thinkers who deal with the Holocaust's meaning are called upon to continue discussing its ethical implications, as well as the moral obligations it imposes upon human beings in general and citizens of the State of Israel in particular.